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PAMPHLETS

ON

THE COUNTRY CHURCH

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Department of Church and Country Life, the Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., 156 Fifth Avenue, New York.

The Parish House in the Country Community

By ANNA B. TAFT

"The 'play of the spirit' is not an empty phrase. It is always the spirit that plays. Our bodies only work. Play is the pursuit of ideals. When released from the daily work,—the mill we have to tread in order to live,—then we strive to become what we would be if we could. When we are free we pursue those ideals which indicate and create character. If they lead us toward wholesome things, then our lives are rounded out, balanced and significant."

This problem of social life confronts the church to-day. The natural leadership of the church in the country community makes it the organization best fitted to promote and control the social life of the locality. To do this adequately there is need of a building or a room apart from the church, geographically if not really. Here may be held sociables, suppers, concerts, fairs and the orthodox round of church activities that have been handed down to us from our ancestors. Here should enter also a more aggressive work for the young people. Boys' clubs, girls' clubs, entertainments, plays,—in fact, a social life

as interesting and fascinating as the most fertile mind can conceive.

One pastor who has struggled for years with the Country Church problem says: "Such a building is an asset of power to the Church. It ministers to the community and enables the Church to discharge its duties in reference to the social needs of the people. It increases the social power of the Church and supplies a place for social gatherings that is superior to any public hall, because it is under the care of the Church."

This work must be modified by local conditions. In the small towns that are fortunate enough to have only one church, the house may be under its care directly. Where the community has several churches, to work together in a neighborhood house, may be the first step toward federation. It has wisely been said that in the country social life is a simple unit. When a country community is composed of cliques and groups and independent associations, the whole fabric of rural society is injured. In the average country town to-day the old-fashioned warmth and cordial hospitality that were so noticeable a generation ago have departed. Some homes still cherish as households this gracious atmosphere, but as a community the social life is chilled and formal, and there is none of the old "getting together" with the joy of a common interest and a common experience which makes a people one. To revive this community sympathy may well be one of the missions of the Parish House. This is not an unattainable ideal; in many places community salvation is being worked out through this simple vehicle for the social life of the people.

An example of a successful and inexpensive Parish House, directly under the care of the one church, is in the village of West Cummington, Mass., a little community fourteen



miles from a railroad or trolley, back in the hills of Hampshire County. The work was started by the women of the church, and born of a realization of the absolute necessity of giving a wholesome social life to the young people of the locality, or facing the problem of rural degeneracy in the next generation.

An abandoned church of another denomination was purchased for a small amount, renovated, and a very suitable parish home was the result. This suggests a wholesome use for many superfluous churches in communities where overlapping is an aggravated problem.

The equipment for the Parish House was partly contributed by friends, but largely obtained by the people themselves, who gradually raised the money by entertainments and social gatherings.

Regularly one evening a week the house is open for the parish—often many evenings beside—with a diversity of program that is extensive and interesting. Amateur dramatics are a very popular form of entertainment, and creditable and artistic results are often obtained. The house is patronized not only by the young people, but is a meeting place for the older ladies, who bring their fancy work, enjoy a social hour of common interest, and sympathetically share the more jolly time of the young people about them.

Another interesting and successful Parish House is in McClellandtown, Pa., under the charge of Rev. Charles O. Bemies, a Presbyterian minister. This is a small community, with a problem complicated by a foreign population. So democratic and genuine is the spirit of this Brotherhood Building that it is a real community center, where gather the farmers, miners and foreigners to share a common life. Mr. Bemies says of the work:

"To meet the situation in our community, we erected what we call a Brotherhood Build-

ing 72x42, with a large auditorium, inclined floor, platform or stage with dressing rooms; a gymnasium, bath and dressing rooms in the basement, besides a well equipped kitchen. The building is fitted with hot water, natural gas and electric light facilities. This building is designed and successfully used for our Young People's meeting and preaching service on Sunday evening, as the church is a mile out of town,—for the Ladies' Aid Society, lectures of various kinds, entertainments and lecture courses, concerts and entertainments by local and outside talent, mining institutes, literary society, farmers' institutes, teachers' institutes, school commencements, amateur plays, special occasions, such as Children's Day and Christmas entertainment, revival services, Slovak meetings, Sunday-school conventions, Bible classes, public meetings for community improvement, socials, festivals, basket-ball games and whatever is for the general welfare of the church and community. We could not measurably fulfill Christ's conception of His Kingdom without the Brotherhood Building."

The Neighborhood House at Weatogue, Conn., is doing the same constructive work, on a more elaborate scale and without connection with any one church, but upholding the Christian ideals in an admirable work in a rural community. Rev. Charles P. Croft, a Congregational minister, is the organizer and promoter of the work. The Neighborhood House, a beautiful old Colonial residence, was the birthplace of Mrs. Croft and given by her for the use of the community. Interested friends have aided in its equipment and maintenance, and under its hospitable roof all kinds of religious services and social functions are held. There is a library open on Saturday evenings, a play room, and usually an entertainment once a week, where home talent is utilized as much as possible. Aside

from this, a large variety of concerts and stereopticon lectures are held, and socials where dancing is allowed but not advertised. Sunday evening there is always a religious service.

The House has no organization, except committees, which are appointed as needed. Every attendant is supposed to be interested in the common good, and nearly every family in the neighborhood is identified in some way, and deeply and happily interested.

Aside from the regular gatherings of the House, it is frequently used by the people for family gatherings, wedding celebrations, young people's parties, "Grand Army" dinners, and many other community affairs. It would be difficult to overestimate the wholesome influence of such a social center in a country town; democratic, constructive and sympathetic, it makes possible the survival of community hospitality and the wholesome development of the boys and girls. It is an old, trite but true saying that "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Unfortunately we have too many young people in the country dull and stupid for the very reason that they never have an opportunity to play as they should; there has been no wholesome recreation to counteract the deadly monotony of their daily task.

To-day there is dawning a new vision of the importance of the Country Church to grapple with the problem of its own community; with it comes forcibly to the front the question of the social life of the people. This is particularly important for the young people, to whom "having a good time" is a very just essential. The question is, How is the church not only to meet but to handle this natural and fundamental need of the youth in its midst? The day is fortunately passing when the social activities of boys and girls are frowned upon by the church, but

the day is only beginning to dawn when the church as an organization is recognizing the ethical value of recreation and using it for the development of the character of those who are its special charge, so that in the end this natural yearning shall prove a blessing and not a curse.

Jane Addams, out of more than twenty years' experience of deeply religious social service, reminds us "To fail to provide for the recreation of youth, is not only to deprive all of them of their natural form of expression, but is certain to subject some of them to the overwhelming temptations of illicit and soul-destroying pleasures."

